

# Moving Away from Nineteenth Century Paradigms: Gertrude Stein's "Melanctha" and the Problem of Female Empowerment

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The increasing visibility of a self in process motivated by either conscious or unconscious desire—some assertion of the self in conflict with the structural boundaries of gendered, racist conduct—marks one expression of a general movement at the turn-of-the-century away from the given canons of nineteenth century historicity. With *Three Lives*, a pioneering, modernist work published in 1909, Gertrude Stein takes direct issue with nineteenth century paradigms of proper gender conduct, emphasizing their cultural/linguistic construct as opposed to what, historically, were considered their natural/biological character.<sup>1</sup>

In "Melanctha," the second and longest of the three narratives that make up *Three Lives*, we are introduced to the mulatto heroine Melanctha whose restless complexity does not allow her to settle into any of the conventional female roles. From the first, the traditional constructs of wife and motherhood with their implicit propriety are questioned. Rose Johnson, Melanctha's black friend, is the one who is married, the one who has given birth. But while Melanctha is "patient, submissive, soothing, and untiring" (81) in her regard for Rose and her baby, Rose herself is "careless, negligent, and selfish" toward Melanctha and, more importantly, toward her own child.<sup>2</sup> We are told that Rose's negligence

1 (New York: Signet Classic [1909] 1985).

2 Ekaterini Georgoudaki goes into in-depth discussion of black, female stereotypes and how contemporary black women writers work to revise these inherited, pre-existing, cultural and literary stereotypes. As a white

goes so far as to cause the baby's death during a period when "Melanctha had to leave for a few days" (81). From the novella's first page, Steir turns standard female roles with their sense of nineteenth century decency into their opposites. Rose Johnson who is "decently" married to "a decent honest, kindly fellow" (82) is in fact "unmoral, promiscuous, [and] shiftless" (83), while Melanctha who is "graceful [and] intelligent" find: herself unable to get "really married" (83). One explanation Stein gives for Melanctha's marginality is that she "was still too complex with desire" (83), motivated by and prey to, the very extremes of emotion and 'wants the nineteenth century domestic novelists found so threatening.<sup>3</sup>

The notion that one might, or can divorce oneself from the uncertainties and mutability of a larger, surrounding world becomes obsolete with the idea that identity is not, in nineteenth century terms, a cultural or biological given, but rather, in modernist terms, something sought created and found. So Stein's Melanctha wanders, seeking new ways and relationships in which to better know herself and is made vulnerable by her exposure to feelings often not even conscious in her nineteenth century counterparts. She "always loved too hard and much too often" (86). She is invaded by indefinable sensibilities, "always full with mystery and subtle movements and denials and vague distrusts and complicated disillusiones" (86). Melanctha's lack of resistance to such infiltration of otherness, to what remains "vague," and not immediately defined, is what distinguishes her modernity and what moves her out of the nineteenth century sense of the self as a unified whole.

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woman writing from a dominant cultural position, Stein makes use of the white stereotypes of black women while nevertheless attempting to investigate the issue of 'otherness' and marginality as represented, for example in the mulatta. Since the focus in this paper is not on black women writers and characters *per se*, but rather on the wider spectrum of female 'desire,' and its manifestations in various contexts, I find it necessary to speak from *within* the contexts established by the writers themselves, given the understanding that the very limitations, racist or otherwise, of these contexts are what force the investigation into their heroines' searching 'desire or *bildung*. Ekaterini Georgoudaki, "Audre Lorde: Revising Stereotypes of Afro-American Womanhood," *Race Gender and Class Perspectives In the Works of Maya Angelou, Gwendolyn Brooks, Rita Dove, Nikki Giovanni and Audre Lorde* (Thessaloniki: Aristotle University of Thessaloniki Press, 1991), pp. 67-91.

3 Nina Baym speaks of how the 19th century domestic novelists believed in an imposed self-sufficiency and self-control when it came to expressing heightened emotion or exploring the pitfalls of female sexuality, because they "were profoundly Victorian in that they has an oppressive sense of reality and its habit of disappointing expectations." Thus, these writers "believed that duty, discipline, self-control, and sacrifice (within limits) were not only moral but actually useful strategies for getting through a hard world." Nina Baym, *Woman's Fiction, A Guide to Novels by and about Women in America, 1820-1870* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1978), p. 18.

The empowerment of gender in authorship and the focus on questions of difference was something consciously avoided on the part of the sentimental novelists, believing as they did in the natural character of women's conventional roles. With "Melanctha" Stein begins to undermine cultural and linguistic structures which work to repress female otherness, and allows her heroine to move beyond the immediate, conventionally restrictive examples of one's biological mother and father. Melanctha's mother is a "pale, yellow, sweet-appearing" woman (87, emphasis added) toward whom Melanctha feels no respect, while she "love[s] very well the power in herself that [comes] through [her father]" (87), though she hates his "black coarse" character. Melanctha exposes herself to feelings which disrupt and challenge "ideologically inflected structures of linear time," such as the family. In allowing for an "invasion of otherness" as Ruddick describes it, Melanctha experiences what the nineteenth century conventions of gender worked to repress, namely the autonomy of woman's pleasure.<sup>4</sup> Here I mean pleasure in its largest sense, in the sense used by Julia Kristeva when she speaks of *jouissance* as a drive of "rhythmic pleasure."<sup>5</sup> According to Kristeva, the subject's exposure to multiple drives, as happens in Melanctha's case, allows her to break away from the constraints of a linearity that confines her to the rituals of reproduction, generation, life and death canonized by the traditional family structure.

Melanctha, who finds her mother's example lacking for what it is she herself wants, and her father's example admirable but problematic, is overwhelmed by contradictions. Though it is her father's power she wishes to possess, we are told it "was not from men that she learned to really understand this power" (93). The issue of power and how to gain it without falling prey to a patriarchal ideology which disempowers female autonomy is a central concern of "Melanctha" and inspires Stein's linguistic experiments with language. Only Melanctha, of the three heroines in *Three Lives*, is marginal to any archetype of conventional female conduct, and her marginality explores the possibility of

4 Lisa Ruddick, *Reading Stein: Body, Text, Gnosis* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990), p. 127.

5 Paraphrasing Julia Kristeva, Toril Moi writes of Kristeva's argument that "the Judaeo-Christian culture represents woman as the unconscious of the symbolic order, as a timeless, drive-related *jouissance*, which through its very marginality threatens to break the symbolic chain." *Jouissance*, a term coined by Kristeva, represents what remains non-verbal, what is of the body, of all drive-related pleasure specific to woman. Toril Moi, ed., *The Kristeva Reader* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), p. 139.

alternatives to the white stereotypes of female self-sacrifice in the stories of Anna and Lena.

Both Anna and Lena die *within* and *while* fulfilling the roles of being the "Good Anna," and "Gentle Lena," respectively. After a life of devotion to her employer, Miss Matilda, Anna dies in a hospital alone, thinking of her employer till the end. "Anna died easy," writes a Miss Mary Wadsmith to Miss Matilda, "and sent you her love" (78). In a similar extreme of self-denial for the sake of others, Lena dies in exhausted childbirth having already had three children. Her husband Herman, in a similar way to Matilda, seems oblivious to his wife's condition: "Lena; always was more and more lifeless and Herman now mostly never thought of her" (280). The paradigmatically empowering female adjectives of "goodness" and "gentleness," which define Anna and Lena, are here stretched to proportions of caricature, deflating the traditionally empowering character of these terms and showing Anna and Lena to be more absurd constructions of mainstream stereotypes than anything real. The solitary, premature deaths of both Anna and Lena are a far cry from any of the transcendent positions of nineteenth century heroines whose goodness and gentleness were celebrated strengths. By refocusing maternal self-sacrifice and selfless devotion as constructions that victimize women, Stein depicts a masochism "defined," as Lisa Ruddick puts it, "as cultural rather than natural."<sup>6</sup>

"Melanctha" provides an alternative to the familiar text of female victimization within white, gender-specific roles; hers is the only narrative the only self in the three stories, whose name is not preceded by, or dependent on, such gender-defining adjectives as "gentle" or "good;" Melanctha's story is simply her own. While this story too ends in death for the heroine, the process by which Melanctha arrives at her ultimate end involves her constant sidestepping of engendered modes of affirmation. For one, Melanctha has immediate problems with language—the available discourse of mainstream ideology—and finds herself unable to express herself in conventional, linear ways: "When it came to [connecting] what had happened and what she had said and what it was that she had really done, Melanctha could never remember right" (97). Stein's "remembering right" implies the ability to keep within the "right" narrative lines of a discourse which dictates specifically sanctioned modes

6 Ruddick, *Reading* Stein, p. 48.

of speaking, acting and remembering. Melanctha finds herself marginal to such conventions of behavior, having "not found it easy with herself to make her wants and what she had, agree" (85).

What Melanctha wants is what separates her from her more traditional counterparts Anna and Lena who are both white, or even Rose Johnson who is black, because Melanctha dares to want at all, a desire which radicalizes her and places her on the margins of society, for the thing she wants has nothing to do with what society can offer her. The clue to Melanctha's difference is in her self-expression, an expression whose source is, significantly, body-related, whose discourse remains unappropriated by convention. We are told that though Melanctha went to school where she was "quick in all her learning," what her father truly fears is "her *tongue* which could be very nasty" (87, emphasis added). Melanctha's use of her "tongue," speaks for, and includes, the more general expression of her physical self, a self whose *jouissance* defies the father's law and explores itself apart from, and in spite of, the mother's traditional role. Her father's frustrated anger at her mother is directed at her inability to curb or control what he sees as Melanctha's wayward independence, an independence that includes the expression of her sexuality and which directly challenges his authority. "A nice way she is going for a decent daughter." He exclaims, "Why don't you see to that girl better you, ain't you her mother!" (91)

Her mother's inability to "see to" her daughter marks the breakdown of the nineteenth century Victorian model of mothers passing down to their daughters the values of "piety, purity and submissiveness," which supposedly worked to repress any autonomy of physical or spiritual desire.<sup>7</sup> While Melanctha is searching, in her "wanderings" (a euphemism for her sexual exploits) for something that would "move her very deeply, something that would fill her fully" (105), Stein's lack of specificity in regard to Melanctha's sexual nature, suggests her sexuality as the source of a more generalized passion, a source of *both* erotic and linguistic power (she uses her tongue to verbally defend herself against her father's physical and verbal brutality).<sup>8</sup> I am tempted to say that Melanctha's

7 Hazel V. Carby, *Reconstructing Womanhood: The Emergence of the Afro-American Novelist* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), p. 21.

8 Lisa Ruddick notes that Melanctha's "wanderings" have been rightly "considered part of a sustained euphemism for sex [while] one might as easily reverse the emphasis and say that sex itself stands in the story as a metaphor for a certain type of mental activity." Melanctha's promiscuity, continues Ruddick, "is part of an

eroticism is potentially the *source* of her linguistic power since the wisdom and knowledge Melanctha seeks comes out of her most intimate relationships.

In *Writing Beyond the Ending* Rachel Blau DuPlessis speaks of the quest and love plots as two dominant narrative strategies in nineteenth century fiction whose discourses were traditionally exclusive of each other. *Bildung* or quest and romance "could not coexist and be integrated for the heroine at the resolution [of the narrative]" since the two discourses were considered contradictory.<sup>9</sup> Stein's grounding of Melanctha's particular form of wisdom in the expression of her sexuality subverts, if it does not manage to revise, DuPlessis' description of the energies of *Bildung* being contained by the convention of marriage. While quest, according to DuPlessis, was often punished with a deprivation of love, Melanctha defines her search for something that will "really wholly fill her" (105, emphasis added) as an attempt to get beyond the sacrificial discourse of mainstream values which deny, in Jane Gallop's words, "the specificity of the subject's desire."<sup>10</sup>

Melanctha's constant "escaping" attempts on the part of men to "come a little nearer" and her problems with telling a story "wholly" (97), reflect Stein's wariness of allowing her heroine to "settle" into linguistic pattern, associated with conventional behavior. It is because Melanctha cannot "remember right" and leaves out "big pieces which make a story very different" (97), that the men want to "come nearer" and become curious about her brand of "world wisdom." But Melanctha instinctively understands, despite her wanderings "on the edge of wisdom" (97), that she partakes of a world whose existent structures are embedded in the very language which limits her possibilities for affirmation. In keeping her heroine "unsettled" linguistically, Stein manages to sidestep the danger of her entrapment in the established, gendered contexts of mainstream culture.

Though Melanctha's exploration of her powers is characterized by misunderstandings, literal and metaphorical "falls," the seeming lack of

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experiential promiscuity, an inability or unwillingness to approach the world selectively." Her sexual wanderings become "wanderings after wisdom ... after world knowledge." Lisa Ruddick, *Reading Stein.*, p. 18.

9 Rachel Blau DuPlessis, *Writing Beyond the Ending: Narrative Strategies of Twentieth Century Women Writers* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985), p. 4.

10 Jane Gallop, *The Daughter's Seduction, Feminism and Psychoanalysis* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press 1990), p. 93.

method to Melanctha's visceral process of learning signals a way of knowing that comes out of a "tissue of associations resembling what psychoanalysis terms primary process." Melanctha's "hazily defined wisdom" as Ruddick calls it, grounded as it is in the experiences she has of "bodily change or upheaval"<sup>11</sup> is what affirms her otherness in ways which set her apart from the dominant cultural paradigms of female identity. In locating Melanctha on the margins of mainstream culture, Stein frees her to explore alternative discourses.

If the "daughters" of early twentieth century women's writing were defined by their need to escape the authoritative power structures of their fathers and their fathers' homes, Stein with "Melanctha," likewise begins a conflicted dialogue with the nineteenth century and the thinking of William James, her own intellectual father.<sup>12</sup> By positioning Melanctha on the margins of society both racially and emotionally, Stein manages to distance her own ambivalent feelings with regard to the sensuous side of her own nature. The fact of Stein's lesbianism which she first confronts in the early Q.E.D., an amateur work that describes her first love affair, is worked into a meditation between rival modes of perception in "Melanctha": Jeff Campbell, the doctor with whom Melanctha has her most significant affair, personifies all the values of a linear, selective approach to mental stimulus and experience, values represented by the Jamesian psychology Stein initially embraced. Melanctha, on the other hand, is a "minimally disguised" version of the passion and daring embodied in May Bookstaver, Stein's first important lover.<sup>13</sup> What Stein uncovers by positioning opposing ways of seeing and experiencing life in

11 Lisa Ruddick points out that Melanctha's presiding over her mother's death and the birth of Rose Johnson's baby, are examples of an idea of consciousness whose grounding lies in "the rhythms of the body." This idea is continuous with the notion that Melanctha's eroticism is the source of her more general power and her orientation to life experiences: "Spiritual knowledge," continues Ruddick, is continuous with "anatomical functions like giving milk or suckling." Ruddick, *Reading Stein*, pp. 42, 31-32.

12 The paradigmatic optimism of 19th century beliefs in evolutionary psychology put forward in the work of William James greatly influenced Gertrude Stein who considered James her mentor during her formative college years at Radcliffe. His "heartening vision of moral and practical success," were crucial in helping her "overcome some of her own self-doubts and inhibitions" (pp. 12-13). Yet, in "Melanctha," Stein begins what was to become a lifelong argument with the supposed superiority of "instrumental thinking" (honored in the characterization of Jeff Campbell) with the values Stein uncovers in a consciousness or wisdom, "grounded in the body" (p. 13). Ruddick, *Reading Stein*, pp. 12-25.

13 Q.E.D. describes the romance between Stein and May Bookstaver; Helen, the character based on Bookstaver, is the seducer, "passionate and daring," while Adele, "the character modeled on Stein, is sexually inhibited and devoted to bourgeois values." Ruddick, *Reading Stein*, p. 15.

the characters of Jeff and Melanctha, is a consciousness of irrational process that stands in tension with those Jamesian values of selectivism which repress or resist the elements of irrational otherness personified in Melanctha.

Stein's experimentation with style owe their beginnings to William James's psychological theories and his idea of "stream of consciousness" as an expression of the "barrage of [our] sensory perceptions, [both] teeming and confused."<sup>14</sup> Yet while James bases his notion of character on the ability of the individual to enact a process of mental selectivity, or "selective attention," in relation to his exposure to sensory stimuli, Stein, through Melanctha, begins to debate the cultural morality of the ethics which inform that process of selection.

Besides the shaping influence James' philosophy had on Stein's stylistics, another determining factor in her vision of composition was her exposure to modern art, specifically (during the writing of *Three Lives*) to a painting of Cezanne's. Stein herself has noted that Cezanne's method, his "flatness" that was the refusal to allow any one detail to be more important than another, taught her to deconstruct the notion of "central idea" in writing.<sup>15</sup> The repetition and cyclical quality of her sentences resist any tendency to closure or definitiveness; we are left with various views of the same information rather than a summary or conclusion of the facts given. In this way Stein attempts linguistically to get "beyond the structures of law in language," which threaten to traumatize Melanctha emotionally.<sup>16</sup> The seeming arbitrariness of Melanctha's "wanderings," point in fact to the restless specificity of her search for something which will "really wholly fill her" (105), a description that connotes both sexual/phallic fulfillment and a spiritual yearning for the total empowerment (both physical and emotional) of her female identity, a desire or jouissance compromised by the binary structure inherent in the values of dominant patriarchal discourse.

Melanctha's meeting with Jeff Campbell is in fact a confrontation, or dialogue, between the two conflicted (at this point in her career) sides of Stein's own self. Jeff, who represents all that is "good and regular" (121) finds in Melanctha's reluctance to define experience according to the standards of convention both a challenge and threat to his notion of

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 16.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 45.

<sup>16</sup> Gallop, *Daughter's Seduction*, p. 93.



propriety. In locating Melanctha's power in her sexuality, Stein manages to demonstrate the reductive/sacrificial nature of a mainstream rhetoric that divides the issue of female sexuality into "a good quiet feeling in a family," and what Jeff sees as "having it like an animal that's low in the streets" (121). As the intimacy deepens between Jeff and Melanctha, Jeff's ability to keep his sense of Melanctha confined to the binary categories of convention becomes both linguistically and emotionally confused. To Melanctha's challenge that he in fact does not think it right to truly love anyone, Jeff answers, "why sure no, yes I do Miss Melanctha, I certainly do believe strong in loving" (119). What Melanctha means by love, a "real, strong hot love [that] makes you do anything for somebody that loves you" (119), involves the disruption of the linguistic terms which seek to contain, and thus neutralize, the essences of otherness embodied in the notion of woman as "'other' body" rather than "woman as the appropriate phallic object."<sup>17</sup>

Though Jeff slowly, and painfully, gives himself to what he believes is his love for Melanctha, the parallel incapacity of discourse to articulate the full complexity of such feeling leaves him floundering for the certainties and reassurances inherent in a language fast losing its authoritative comfort:

Jefferson always had thought he knew something about women. Now he found that really he knew nothing. He did not know the least bit about Melanctha. He did not know what it was right that he should do about it... It was very hard for him to know what he wanted (127).

I would suggest that the fact of Stein's lesbianism provided her with a certain distance in respect to the mainstream which freed her to explore the alternative 'ways of knowing' personified in Melanctha. Jeff attempts to make Melanctha 'legible' within a cultural discourse which finds in unarticulated, less predictable emotion the doubtful shades of what cannot be made immediately legible. In Melanctha's emotional and linguistic dodging of Jeff's effort to make her legible within a social context familiar to him, Stein creates a linguistic 'space' for what remains unnamed by the established value system. Melanctha tells him, "I am certainly afraid I don't think much of your kind of feeling Dr. Campbell" (129). Jeff's exposure to Melanctha's difference teaches him to discover

17 *Ibid.*

his own emotional range "this funny kind of feeling" he "had never before had" (134), yet Jeff, even in his most confused moment essentially wants to find the stability of concrete self-definition.

While Melanctha is both a "gentleness ... more tender than sunshine and a woman whose "hard laughter" (135) unsettles Jeff, Jeff insists on discovering Melanctha's one, 'real' self, a notion in keeping with nineteenth century beliefs in centered, unified selfhood which Stein shatters in her demonstration of the arbitrary exclusiveness informing such term Melanctha, who is occupied if not overwhelmed with the always changing expression of her emotional state, continually reassures Jeff of her feelings for him, a reassurance which Jeff cannot accept without returning, often despite himself, to a structure of polarization which in Jane Gallop's words, "is a theoretical representation of difference [that] tames and binds the anxiety" (93) provoked by Melanctha's difference which is exemplified in her multiplicity.

In his effort to discover Melanctha's one 'real' self, Jeff listens to stories of her past from her various friends. Jane Harden, careful to specify that Melanctha, despite her various "wanderings," was not "a bad one," tells Jeff of Melanctha's "good mind" and the fact that she "always liked to use all the understanding ways that Jane had taught her, and so [Melanctha] wanted to know everything, always...." (142). Finding himself overwhelmed with uncertainty about Melanctha's 'true' nature Jeff becomes alienated, feeling suddenly "very sick" (142). The anxiety implicit in Jeff's confrontation with "the essences of [Melanctha's] otherness," returns him to binary definitions of "good [familiar]" and "bad [unfamiliar]" gendered behavior. Melanctha suddenly "certainly did seem very ugly to him" (142) he notes, giving in to the values of social categories which do not take into consideration the authenticity of feelings (on both his and Melanctha's parts) which remain apart:

I certainly do very badly want to be *right*, Melanctha, the only way I know is *right* Melanctha *really*, and I don't know any way, Melanctha, to find out *really* whether my old way, the way I always used to be thinking, or the new way, you make so like a *real* religion to me sometimes, Melanctha, which way certainly is the *real right* way for me to be always thinking...Can't you help me to any way, to make it all straight for me, Melanctha, so I know *right* and *real* what it is I should be acting (157, emphasis added).

Stein's use and juxtaposition of the various meanings of "real" and "right" in this passage, emphasize both the poignant confusion of Jeff's effort to

"do right," his questioning of the absolute authority of his "way," and his inability to do without the reliability of those conventional values. Stein's play with the various contexts of "right" "real" and "really," also subverts the omniscient authority of what these terms conventionally signify. In other words, the exact placement of what is in fact "real" or "right" is left unresolved, providing a linguistic space for what may lie outside an ideological text of mainstream valuations. Though Melanctha has no language to "make it all straight" for Jeff, her truth, or her "ways" this passage implies, is no less authentic for the fact that she cannot fit or define it within any one "real right way."

As Jeff inevitably begins to distance himself from Melanctha, feeling he could "soon come back and be happy in his old way of regular and quiet living" (193), Melanctha returns to her "wandering" habits, her search for that knowledge which will "really wholly fill her" (105). It is only after the relationship has ended that Jeff realizes "what it was to love Melanctha" (203), paradoxically illustrating the loss of the relationship as the price of "really" knowing one another. "You know you can trust yourself to me," Jeff tells Melanctha before he leaves, to which Melanctha answers, "Yes, I know, I know Jeff, really" (205). The statements here express the ironic inadequacy at the heart of available texts on romantic bonding and speak dramatically of the price paid for what proves to be the elusive stability promised by convention's terms of decency: Jeff leaves never to see Melanctha again, and Melanctha in her restless wandering moves on to more disappointing relationships which only leave her abandoned, lonely and finally dying.

Stein's experimentation with the arbitrariness of the signifying values implicit in convention's discourse uncovers its sacrificial motives in reference to what it names and therefore legitimates, and what remains other and illegitimate to dominant social contexts. The French psychologist/philosopher Jacques Lacan has pointed out (with Freud) that with the Name-of-the-Father, the fear of the autonomy of the mother's body, the mother as other body, is neutralized. Jane Gallop notes that nothing guarantees the mother's fidelity except the symbolic appropriation of her body by patriarchy. "Infidelity then," she continues, "is a feminist practice of undermining the Name-of-the-Father."<sup>18</sup> (48). I would like to use the idea of infidelity to describe the subversive dimension of Stein's

18 *Ibid.*, p. 48.

linguistic play. Jeff questions Melanctha's fidelity because of her "wanderings," but Melanctha's fidelity is to her feelings (feelings that include her declared love for Jeff) which remove her from the patriarchal and linguistic structure of representation which defines woman through her inscription into patriarchal law, that is, according to her possession (either as daughter or wife) by the Father.

In her paraphrasing of Lacan's discussion of woman, Jane Gallop speaks of Lacan's dichotomy of a knowledge based on exchange, i.e. woman as the exchangeable authorized possession of man, and a knowledge based on use, i.e. a value that does not rest on exchange. Gallop's discussion becomes enlightening when applied to the emotional impasse of Jeff and Melanctha's relationship since it is the very issue of Jeff's inability to "possess" Melanctha linguistically (and therefore emotionally) which destroys the trust between them. At the same time the juxtaposition of Lacan's distinction between a knowledge based on "use" or *jouissance* and that based on exchange parallels the opposition of the kind of knowledge (corporeal and spiritual) represented in Melanctha's experiences, and the inherited values in the terms of Jeff Campbell's discourse. "If *jouissance*," writes Gallop "is a use value which subverts exchange value, then it is a female pleasure, not restricted to biological females, but placing itself ... on the side of resistance to phallic universalization, the side of surprise" (50). This description of "female pleasure," as resisting the pressures of closure reflects a fact of Stein's stylistics: the element of "surprise" is the effect of process, as opposed to the stasis of definition, which is never complete.<sup>19</sup> Melanctha is continually learning, using the knowledge she acquires but is unable to articulate fully, it is a *jouissance* of experience which the given linguistic structure attempts to subsume and ultimately marginalize.

In yet another failed attempt to name what it is she is looking for Melanctha toward the end of her narrative falls back on the only discourse available to her: "Always [she] wanted peace and quiet, and always she could only find new ways to get excited" (207, emphasis added). An increasingly violent juxtaposition between Melanctha's need for peace and quiet and the reality of her situation undermines the promise inherent in

<sup>19</sup> Jane Gallop goes into lengthy discussion about Lacan's understanding of the symbolic role of the "Name-of-the-Father" as the legal assignation of a Father's name to a child: "If the mother's femininity both her sexuality and her untrustworthiness were affirmed, the Name-of-the-Father would always be in doubt, always subject to the question of the mother's morality." Gallop, *Daughter's Seduction*, p. 39.

the significance of these words; she is left alienated by the ideology implicit in a conventional discourse which fails to affirm her otherness. Weakened both spiritually and physically by a debilitating fever, Melanctha attempts simply to live by the standard requirements of conventional values: she "took a place and began to work and live regular (235, emphasis added). It is the only time in the narrative that we are told of Melanctha's living by the codes of "regularity" and she, contrary to the promise of such terms, is destroyed. Immediately after the sentence informing us of her now regular life, we are told "Melanctha got very sick," and within the paragraph she is dead of consumption, a double violence that is both her spiritual and physical death, having in resigned fashion bought into the only discourse of affirmation left to her, a rhetoric whose conventionality masks its violence.

Part of the failure of the "daughters" of early twentieth century writing to fully affirm their identities, particularly their sense of difference, had to do with the models of power they found themselves necessarily identifying with. Often haunted by the specter of the weak and victimized mother these daughters looked to their fathers as examples of power. The inevitable price of a female identification with male privilege often found these daughters/authors doubly vulnerable to the dominant power structures they attempted to enter. Melanctha's last, most destructive relationship is with Jem Richards, a gambler in whom she recognizes the power she first identifies in her father: "He knew how to win out," she notes, "and always all her life, Melanctha Herbert loved successful power" (217). The mistake Melanctha makes here is the same one she makes with her friend Rose Johnson. In her growing need to attach herself to something or someone she believes embodies strength, Melanctha is deluded by the established authority of Rose's seeming "regularity," and Jem Richards' brutalizing strength. Unlike Melanctha's immigrant "sisters" her complete absence of parental guidance allows her an absolute dependence on her own instinctive and intellectual resources, but leaves her emotionally orphaned.

The inevitable mistake of substituting (or imitating) male power structures in various attempts at female empowerment is only gradually interrogated as experiences of marginality are themselves empowered on their own terms. In "Melanctha" we get hints of what in Stein's later work will become a full-fledged grounding of an alternative discourse located in the nurturing physicality of the female body and its functions.

Lisa Ruddick finds in Melanctha's "presiding at moments of bodily change or upheaval" (31), a subtext which will be more explicitly explored in Stein's later work. But at this point in her career, with "Melanctha", Stein only suggests the sources of potential empowerment in the repetition of two events which demonstrate the origins of Melanctha's emotional failure and victimization. As Ruddick notes, "Stein's style is not as free as it looks ... what secretly preoccupies the narrator is [that] ... a woman fails to mother; a man harms a woman sexually." I would extend Ruddick's insight to suggest that the two events are connected, that the lack of maternal protection is what makes Melanctha particularly vulnerable to male aggression and emotional abuse. It is her mother's failure to provide Melanctha with significant nurturing and her own father's abuse, which she reenacts by choosing "friends and lovers who reproduce her parents' damaging behavior."<sup>20</sup>

A brief alternative to the dominant paradigm of female masochism in a world of male privilege is provided in the relationship between Melanctha and Jane Harden. Here Stein seems to be experimenting with the idea that a necessary 'maternal' nurture will provide the emotional basis needed for the empowerment of female otherness. In the ongoing conversations between the two women neither one initially dominates the other. As Lisa Ruddick notes, the physical intimacy of Melanctha's sitting at Jane's feet listening to her storytelling suggests "a lesbianism which offers a potential model for a poetics of dialogue." Jane's stories provide an alternative narrative form in which the hierarchies of conventional values are absent: "There was nothing good or bad in doing, feeling, thinking or in talking, that Jane spared [Melanctha]" (103). The possibility of an alinear, open-ended narrative text which Jane's example briefly provides ultimately remains only that, a potential, for the "female power," Jane represents is also problematic. Once Melanctha feels herself strengthened by Jane's "lessons," it "began to be all different" (103), and Jane's unaggressive power begins to look very much like "the brutal coercion displayed by Melanctha's father."<sup>21</sup>

<sup>20</sup> Referring to *Tender Buttons* in particular, Lisa Ruddick describes what for Stein became a stylistics or philosophy of consciousness that grounded itself "in what might be called the rhythms of the body." Ruddick expands on this notion of 'physicality' in consciousness, quoting from *Tender Buttons*, "*out of an eye comes research*...knowledge emanates from the eye, like tears...spiritual knowledge or 'in-sight' is continuous with anatomical functions like giving milk or suckling." Ruddick, *Reading Stein*, pp. 31-32, 42, 47.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 46-47.

The subtext of female bonding, or "the effort at reimagining the dynamics in relationships" as an alternative to male paradigms of power resurfaces in other texts of the period but always problematical, as the expression of female-identified passions are themselves still defined within the larger structure of cultural values upheld by patriarchy.<sup>22</sup> Feeling confused and in need of support, Melanctha turns to Rose for the "comfort" her "simple, solid, decent" (233) ways seem to promise, but Rose only castigates Melanctha with the rumors she's heard of Melanctha's wandering life: "I always been to like you," she says, "[but] I hear more things now so awful about you" (231). As long as Rose is in need of Melanctha's help, either as a new mother or when she was herself single, Rose shows a certain friendship which is removed when Melanctha finds herself in desperate need of the seeming stability Rose represents. "Melanctha Herbert clung to Rose in the hope that Rose could save her. Melanctha felt the power of Rose's selfish, decent kind of nature. It was so solid, simple, certain to her...." (209). Yet Rose, using as an excuse the fact of Melanctha's unconventionality, her restless wandering (or eroticism), quite literally closes the door on her friend at her moment of acute vulnerability. It is immediately after this that Melanctha gets involved with the abusive Jem Richards and, ultimately abandoned by him, is left to her final sickness and death.

The effort to empower female sexuality apart from its expression within a mainstream context proves destructive, since Rose—Melanctha's hope for emotional support—is too much a product of the gender conventions of patriarchy to explore the potentials of female bonding. It is as if the rather blatant absence of any nurturing maternal influence in the works of early twentieth century writers was a partial reason for the exploration, if unsuccessful, of other "maternal" alternatives, or sources of nurture, in an otherwise "anti-maternal" tradition.<sup>23</sup> The repeated events of violence which Lisa Ruddick cites as the 'hidden' subtext of Stein's narrative, that a woman fails to mother and a man abuses a woman sexually, returns us to the notion of female emotional vulnerability in a

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 25.

<sup>23</sup> Carol Smith-Rosenberg speaks of the turn-of-the-century women writers, and writes of the 1920s and 30s as women who wanted to be free from the considerations of gender, and therefore experimented "with questions of androgyny and lesbianism" (p. 292). These women, Smith-Rosenberg points out, "inevitably borrowed and spoke with men's metaphors and images" (*ibid.*), yet while they were left "newly independent," they were also "isolated," since men "refused to share their power with them" (p. 294). Carol Smith-Rosenberg, *Disorderly Conduct: Visions of Gender in Victorian America* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1985).

world where neither women (as subsumed by patriarchy), nor men (as the embodiments of patriarchy), are capable of providing a necessary sustenance (emotional and physical) for the successful representation of the "female narcissistic ego" (Gallop 74). Jane Gallop presents the problem in psychoanalytic terms,:

Women need to reach 'the same': that is, be 'like men,' able to represent themselves. But they also need to reach 'the same,' 'the homo': their own homosexual economy, a female homo-sexuality that ratifies and glorifies female standards ... without a female narcissistic ego, a way to represent herself, a woman in a heterosexual encounter will always be engulfed by the male homosexual economy, will not be able to represent her difference.<sup>24</sup>

Given the inability to express, or represent, themselves within linguistic terms which might, in Gallop's words ratify and glorify "female standards," we find the appearance of 'textual cracks,' within existing linguistic structures and their valuations. Where "the book's unconscious" — what Gallop defines as "the attempt of desire to speak itself" — overwhelms the binary ideology of set signifying categories, the standard meanings of conventional valuations are shattered.<sup>25</sup> Stein tells us, for example, that Rose Johnson is "regularly married," (85) that Jeff Campbell believes in living "regular," and that Melanctha, before she dies, "began to work and live regular" (235). Stein's deconstruction of the values implicit in language disturbs its 'consolidating' function and begins to question (by bringing into conflict) the supposedly higher faculties of rational (Jeff's 'thinking') consciousness with what remains more opaque and material (Melanctha's 'feeling'). With Melanctha's death Stein demonstrates the *literal* sacrifice of the body (the material, the nonrational) which informs the *figurative* "representationalism of androcentric discourse."<sup>26</sup> In her use of repetition, sentences with repetitive words whose meanings alternate in the repetition, Stein reduces words to their sounds which, read aloud, become monotonous and rhythmic, disrupting the division between "consciousness and the rhythms

<sup>24</sup> Gallop, *Daughter's Seduction*, p. 74.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 111.

<sup>26</sup> Margaret Homans writes of the patriarchal constructs preserved in language which rely on the mother's absent sexuality, that language comes out of her loss, her absence. Within this linguistic and/or emotional absence, "women must remain the literal [the literal *body* of language] in order to ground the figurative substitutions sons generate and privilege." Margaret Homans, *Bearing the Word, Language and Female Experience in Nineteenth Century Women's Writing* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), pp. 9, 1-12



of the body.”<sup>27</sup> If Stein was unable, at this point, to in fact allow the sensory, material aspect of her poetics to transcend the authority of patriarchal discourse (Melanctha dies transgressing the father's rules of proper gender conduct), she nevertheless demonstrates the sacrifice inherent in its values and undermines the orthodoxy of the mind-body dualism upon which that discourse bases itself.

In Stein's later work, particularly after *The Making of Americans* — what she has called her murder of the nineteenth century — she consciously joins female sexuality to textuality. Stein's lesbianism and her exploration of a female sexual pleasure independent of men, gave her the freedom to better uncover the 'body' of language, and to show how the structures of representation in language depend on the repression of the raw and sensory data of female experience, whether biological or social. At this point in her career, while Stein attempts, in her use of unconventional narrative structures, to make room for the inconsistencies of lived life over the ideology of containment inherent in established, gendered structures, “Stein could not shake off the thought that to wander outside a father's orbit is to court disaster.”<sup>28</sup>

The movement out of a patriarchal text with its fixed narrative constructs implies the ability on the part of female authors and/or heroines to displace its authority with some matrilineal paradigm. While the issue of maternity and matriarchy remains subsumed by the canons of patriarchy, the possibility of a female heroine emerging as the hero of her own text is restricted to the limitations of an already established discourse which upholds given cultural paradigms: there remains little if any space for the revision of a rhetoric whose ideology silences the (m)other's tongue, and therefore refuses the daughter any alternative to the given (patriarchal) text. In Stein's visionary attempt to deconstruct the exclusionary terms of established linguistic structures, she pioneers the effort of later women writers to give the daughters of more contemporary fiction the chance to do their own naming.

<sup>27</sup> Gallop, *Daughter's Seduction*, p. 152.

<sup>28</sup> Ruddick, *Reading Stein*, p. 257.